

11-30-25 Sermon: “Jesus Is Coming, So...Prepare” -Matthew 24:36-44 & Romans 13:11-14

I consider myself a morning person. I like the dawn, the early hours, the promise of a new day. And I wake up pretty easily; I’m much more likely to be functional and in a good mood at 6 AM than at 6 PM.

But there is one circumstance in which even I find it difficult to wake up. And that is when it is still dark outside. Truly, it can be a difference of ten minutes. If that sun has even just begun to peek over the horizon – just barely changing the color of the night sky – I’m good, I’m up, and I’m all in on this idea of a new day. But woe to the one who tries to wake me a few minutes *before* the light changes, while it is still dark.

But according to this morning’s Scripture readings from Matthew and Romans, that is exactly we as Christians are called to do. To wake up and get ready while it is still dark.

Today is the first Sunday of the season of Advent, the first Sunday of the liturgical year. During Advent, we wait and watch and hope and pray and ready ourselves for Christmas – the coming of Christ into our world again, and again, and again. Week by week, we light candles and sing carols to chase away the darkness and proclaim the truth of a light that shines in that darkness – and the darkness does not overcome it.

It’s an interesting contrast – isn’t it? – that Advent, this season of light comes at this darkening time of year. The days get shorter, and the weather gets colder, and as our world descends into that darkness, we the church light our candles and proclaim that Christ is the light of the world.

Advent comes this year, as it has in many years past, at a time when our common life feels dark as well. We live these days as a people divided, with this sense that our nation is right on the edge of catastrophe. For some of us, that catastrophe may already be unfolding.

We fear for our hospital and our social welfare systems. We watch as institutions and principles that we hold dear are dismantled before our very eyes. We see our neighbors being handcuffed and carted away, and for all our trying, we feel powerless to stop it. A few minutes ago, Sherry and Cliff lit the candle of hope, but hope feels scarce and hard to come by these days, does it not?

It’s dark outside – literally and metaphorically – which makes it very tempting to keep on sleeping. Why not stay in bed just a few more minutes, until the light begins to show itself on the horizon? Why not wait for some good things to happen – to give us a *reason* to be hopeful – rather than standing in the cold, lighting our candles in darkness, proclaiming that the light is on its way?

And yet, the message of the gospel is clear. “You know what time it is,” Paul says, “how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep, for salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers. The night is far gone; the day is near.” “Keep awake,” Jesus admonishes, “for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”

There is, it seems, no snooze button on our liturgical calendar. The “theological alarm clock of Advent goes off while it is still dark.”¹

The Gospel calls us to wake up, even though it’s still dark. Or perhaps...the gospel calls us to wake up *especially because* it’s still dark. Because the God we worship has always been in the business of doing great things in the darkness.

In the darkness of the primordial waters, the Spirit moves over the face of the deep and speaks creation into being, saying, “Let there be light.” In the darkness of night, Jacob wrestles with the angel and secures God’s blessing. During the night, Joseph dreams his extravagant

dreams, and the Angel of Death passes over the Hebrew children. It is in the dark of night that Jesus is born in a stable, and under the cover of darkness that he is betrayed and arrested. When Jesus dies on Good Friday, the sky turns black, and darkness covers the land.

And it is early in the morning on the third day, “while it is still dark,” that the women discover the empty tomb and bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Friends, the God we have come to know in Jesus is a God who does marvelous and mysterious things in the dark. A God who accomplishes the salvation of the world in the shadows right before the break of day. Maybe Advent calls us to wake up and get to work while it is still dark because that is precisely the time when God is doing God’s best work.

Today, we lit only one candle in our Advent wreath. And let’s be honest – one candle doesn’t give off much light. And yet we dare to call this candle the Candle of Hope. Because hope means lighting candles against the darkness. Hope means preparing for the day even before we see the first rays of the sun. Hope means engaging in the mission of Jesus even when it feels impossible. It is doing justice, loving kindness, feeding the hungry, bringing good news to the poor. Hope is trusting that our work is faithful and that it matters, even when the light we’ve been waiting for has not yet come.

On New Year’s Eve 2017, a group of interfaith leaders gathered late at night at the Metropolitan AME church in Washington, DC, for a watchnight service. Late night vigils have long been a part of Christian tradition, but the New Year’s Eve watchnight is a particularly special service. It dates back to December 31, 1862, when African Americans gathered in churches across the country to wait and watch for the moment when the Emancipation Proclamation – and their freedom – would take effect: 12 midnight on January 1, 1863.

One of the speakers at that 2017 service was a young Sikh lawyer and activist named Valarie Kaur. She began by talking about other dark times in our nation’s history: 103 years ago, when her grandfather immigrated from India to America and was thrown into jail upon arrival because his “foreignness” was considered suspect. Japanese internment during World War II. The violence that erupted against Sikh and Muslim communities in the wake of 9/11. The extra-judicial shootings of black and brown men and women that litter our history.

Kaur concluded this litany of darkness with the affirmation that yes, the world is dark, and the future looks to be dark, too. But what if that darkness is not, in fact, cause for despair? What if this darkness we are waiting in is not the darkness of the tomb, Valarie asks, but the darkness of the womb? We have assumed that our present darkness means death and brokenness, have feared that it means that we as a people too far gone. But what if we’re actually a people waiting to be born?²

Maybe Advent only ever comes to those who watch and wait in darkness. Perhaps only people walking in darkness can taste the sweetness of hope when they see that first glimmer of light. Could it be that only those who have known suffering and vulnerability can proclaim with credibility that God is coming to dwell with us as a tiny helpless baby?

So friends, wake up. It’s dark outside, yes, but hope is not lost. Get dressed and get ready. It is time to join our Savior in the darkness of the womb as we wait together for God’s grace to be born. Amen.

¹ Cynthia M. Campbell, “Romans 13:11-14: Pastoral Perspective,” **Feasting on the Word**, eds. David . Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Year A, Vol. 1, (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2010) 16.

² <https://valariekaur.com/2017/01/watch-night-speech-breathe-push/>.